The Fourth Church Pulpit

WHO WANTS TO BE NUMBER ONE?

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: James 2:14-16, Mark 10:35-45

"... whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant."
Mark 10:43 (NRSV)

We have heard it so frequently that we no longer experience its power. In fact, I wonder if we ever truly hear it:

> "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave to all."

It's in the text for the day and just about the time I was starting to think about it, and how church folk have heard so many attempts to interpret it and apply it with energy and imagination, just about the time I was about to set aside this over-used and worn-out saying of Jesus in favor of something a little livelier and more interesting, I heard from Emilie. Emilie is a member of this congregation. She is a nurse, and a few months ago, when the newspapers and television news shows and national magazines were full of those ghastly pictures from Rwanda, the brutal violence, the starvation, the suffering simply beyond our capacity to comprehend, Emilie got it in her mind that she ought to do something. So she did some quick research and discovered a volunteer ecumenical organization of health care professionals who had access to the refugee camps and some of the worst situations of human suffering; and in the middle of the summer, just as I was getting ready to go to the ocean for a week, Emilie finished up her inoculations and flew to Rwanda. Her letter arrived two weeks ago.

> "Dear Jeanette, John, Nancy, Tom, Linda, Dave, Rhashell, et al.,
>
> "Hello from Kigali – where my hearty band of evangelicals and I have started up Central Kigali Hospital – once 600 beds, from scratch. This torn, bullet-pock-marked, and mortar destroyed city once had a population of 350,000, but the U.N. reports that 80,000 have died following a machete massacre. I have seen the evidence. (There follow several paragraphs of details, too brutal to speak about).
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> "At first, I worked in the adult cholera wards until it was discovered that I had pediatric experience and was assigned the unenviable task of opening the pediatric ward. Being Presbyterian, I approached the task similarly to how I thought Florence Nightingale would, insisting on a much higher degree of cleanliness and sanitation than would be thought, seeing that we had no electricity or running water.
>
> "My team of Rwandans – nurses, translators, cleaners – are simply superb and we have a census of at least twenty children – at least two of whom die at night, sometimes three or four."

And then she explains how sometimes the babies die in her arms.

> "Sometimes children die so suddenly and swiftly it seems as if they 'evaporate' and I am left peering into a shaft of light that weakly penetrates fixed, dilated pupils, a sign of irreversible brain damage.
>
> "Anymore I don't even do C.P.R., for there is nothing to bring them back to."

She finished the letter from Nairobi where she had been sent for some rest. She thanks Jeanette for paying her bills while she is gone and tells us about worshiping in a Pentecostal Church because the Presbyterian Church in Rwanda was blown to bits.

> "You don't know how lucky you are in America.

"Keep praying," she urges us, "and thank you for your support, especially Nancy who thought this was a calling.

"Fondly, Emilie"

Well, according to Jesus, Emilie is the greatest. She is first among all of us – or at least in the first rank of those who serve – humbly, quietly, helpfully ... our great ones. It is, in fact, a calling ... a direct and specific one at that. It is what Jesus told his disciples to do.

The incident happens three times in Mark's Gospel.

On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus warns his disciples that the road ahead will not be easy: that he's headed for a confrontation with the authorities and the results will not be pleasant. In all probability he will suffer: in all probability he will not survive.

And three times the disciples don't hear, or refuse to hear. First it's Peter:

"God forbid Lord that anything like that should happen to you."

The second time he warns them about the suffering ahead and this time they're arguing about who among them is the greatest. It's very bad taste to say the least. He's talking about his death and they're arguing about rank and privilege.

A third time it happens: the warning about suffering and death. This time it's James and John, part of the inner circle, his closest friends, who choose the moment to present an almost infantile request:

"Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask." Well, who wouldn't? "Do me a favor?" we ask. I always want to say, "Before I answer that, tell what the favor is." Their request is outrageous – "Let us sit at your right hand and left hand in your glory."

He's walking toward his death and they're still assuming that he'll become king and they'll reap the rewards of association with him. They hear the words but not the music someone quipped. Jesus is leading but they're headed in the opposite direction.

And then, to make matters worse, the other ten get angry with them not, one suspects, because they have been so thoughtlessly tasteless, but because James and John beat everybody else to the punch. Each of them had wanted to make that request for privilege, prestige, position – greatness.

His response, given the conditions, is extraordinary. He doesn't criticize or scold them for their lack of sensitivity. He doesn't tell them it's wrong to be thinking like that at a time like this. What he says is that you've got the basics all wrong. Sitting at the right and left hand of the King is not greatness – at least in God's eyes. Greatness is service. If you want to be first you have to be last. If you aspire to greatness, you have to learn about service.

That is a radically different agenda from the one they assumed was operating. And behind it is a radically different social vision from their society's, and our own for that matter.

They knew what greatness meant. Caesar was great. Herod was great. Great men have power. They have people around them catering to their every whim. A great man isn't a servant – he has servants.

And so it is: greatness is a state measured by dollars, firepower, horsepower. Greatness is having enough to never have to serve anyone.

Novelist and social critic Tom Wolfe continues to look deeply into the heart of our culture. In his novel, *Bonfire of the Vanities,* the 1980's obsession with money and cast equation of wealth with greatness is portrayed with unblinking accuracy and brilliant sarcasm, something the motion picture never quite captured. The main character, erman McCoy, an enormously successful bond salesman, gets in a lot of trouble, personally and financially. ings are going from bad to worse but he's in a kind of solid gold trap. Wolfe writes about him.

> "Obviously he could cut down ... but not nearly enough. There was no getting out from under the $1.8 million loan, the crushing $21,000-a-month nut, without paying it off or selling the apartment and moving into one far smaller, and more modest – an impossibility! Once you had lived in a $2.6 million apartment on Park Avenue – it was impossible to live in a $1 million apartment. Obviously, there was no way to explain this to a living soul."

Or, greatness is military power – or professional excellence. Greatness is being the biggest and best. Greatness is being number one which is such a cultural icon with us that little league athletes celebrate their every success with our most visible symbol – one raised finger, thrust into the air – "We're number one!"

One hastens to add that it has not been much of a temptation recently for admirers of the Cubs or the Bears – although there's always tonight. And while we had an authentic contender for number one in the White Sox, the strike interceded and saved us just in the nick of time. One is tempted to put a theological spin on our plight and console ourselves – that while being dead last isn't fun, maybe God is teaching us something about greatness.

Jesus turned upside down the definition of religion in his world. One of the observations of current scholarship on the life and times of Jesus is that he challenged the very foundation of religion and life in general by redefining the purpose of religion as compassion, mercy, kindness, service, love of neighbor; instead of moral purity, cleanness, holiness, obedience to the rules and regulations that defined religious orthodoxy. According to Marcus Borg, a Professor of Religion at Oregon State University, and whose book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time,* a group of us are studying on Friday mornings, Jesus' radical contribution to religious thought is his idea of God as passionate instead of holy: God as merciful and kind, instead of transcendent and other: God as nurturing and embracing, rather that God in a remote part of the heavens holding court and judging the moral and political shortcomings of human beings. It was his radical theology, Borg says, that led him to challenge his culture's basic assumptions ... Because God was compassionate, God's people – politically and socially – should be guided more by compassion than by a desire to be pure. And religion – the religion of Jesus – was very different from his people's or any people's religion. It produced an open, inclusive, accepting community of people who were far more worried about not excluding anyone than they were about maintaining appropriate boundaries to keep the righteous in and the sinners out.

For Jesus, what mattered most was compassion and its behavioral expression in service. Thus, he was perfectly serious when he said that people who strive for greatness must learn to serve.

Let's go in deeper: if Jesus was right about God; if God is compassionate, and if we are created in the image of God, then being compassionate and serving others is simply being who we were created to be, being fully human, listening to our deepest instincts.

Robert Coles, a physciatrist who teaches at Harvard, thinks you can see that in us if you observe carefully. He describes a scene many of us have witnessed: sleeping babies in a nursery, quietly dozing. One of the babies starts crying, in pain, or colic, and the other babies respond with their cries. But, says Coles, who is a child psychiatrist

> "Their cries are not the cry of pain but rather the cry of empathy in response to someone else's pain. These children are not even old enough to have language but they respond instinctively to someone else's cry." Concludes Dr. Coles, "You're in the presence of the child's first responses to the outside world." [In *Homiletics,* Vol. 6, Number 3, Leonard Sweet, Editor]

William Bennett, in his current bestseller, *The Book of Virtues,* includes compassion; also refers to the nursery.

> "It is our twentieth-century understanding that human infants do not distinguish between their own distress and that of others. One baby's cries in the nursery are frequently picked up by the rest, and together they form a natural choral symphony of sympathetic woe." [p. 107]

Not only are we at our most human and our best when we serve others, we also invariably learn something important, namely that the one who benefits most from acts of service is the one who does the serving. One of the closely guarded secrets of ministry is that people think that we are doing them a favor and thank us profusely for visiting them in the hospital, or in retirement homes – but ministers all know and experience that the benefit ultimately is ours.

Robert Coles has written a book, *The Call of Service,* in which he tells a charming story about nine-year-old Ruth Ann, a 4th grade student in a ghetto school where Coles does his service as a teacher. With childish candor, Ruth Ann asks him:

> "We were wondering why you come over here ... you must be pretty busy ... where did you get the idea? Did you hear something bad about us?" And then she tells Coles about overhearing her mother good-naturedly complain about all the volunteers who come into the housing project and how she has to take them by the hand to orient them and sometimes protect them. Nine-year-old Ruth Ann said to Dr. Coles, "It's nice that some of you folks come here ... and we'll try to (help you), to tell you everything we know."

Robert Coles, psychiatrist knows that sometimes the healthiest, most therapeutic prescription he makes is suggesting to troubled people that they find someone else to worry about and care for and serve. He reflects:

> "The call to service is a call to others, but also a call inward, a call to oneself." [p. 284]

> "Whoever wishes to be great must be your servant and whoever wishes to be first – must be slave of all."

Jesus' words come as a jolt to self-centered religion which focuses exclusively on personal salvation, personal moral purity and theological orthodoxy. His words come as a challenge to churches whose purpose is institutional maintenance or survival. The Church of Jesus Christ is a service institution. Sometimes we're asked why we place such a premium on our community ministries; why we talk so much about tutoring and counseling and social services and housing and clothing; why we are always talking about other people instead of us; why we insist on investing our resources in programs for others.

This is the answer. It's what Jesus, Lord of the Church, told us to do. It's what we're here for. And no, it isn't going to solve the mammoth urban problems of housing, employment, racism, education – which conspire against brothers and sisters who are, literally, our neighbors. We are not naive. It is not enough. It is not even very much. But it is what our Lord told us to do – to try to be great, not by the size of our budget or the elegance of our building, but by the service we perform.

We do it as a church, a community which lives in the midst of the most exuberantly materialistic segment of our culture, arguably one of the glittsiest intersections in America, precisely because it is so important to hold up an alternate social vision here, a vision of a society in which people care most of all about one another. We do it precisely because each of us cannot go to Rwanda, or build a house or serve a meal or teach a child, but some of us can, and will, and do, on behalf of all of us. In a very real sense which she, I know understands, Emilie is in Kigali because we are here and she is there for us. And so is each tutor, each volunteer.

Why do we spend so much energy and resources on others? Well, if truth be known, there is a sense in which we don't. We may not plan it that way – but the benefit is ours. We do it because our Lord has shown us that it is how we become fully human, God's children, crowned with glory and honor. It's his prescription for our greatness.

Not all of us can serve as tutors. But some can. Not many of us can go to Rwanda. But one did. Each of us, however, can be a servant. And I know many, many who are servants with grace, and anonymity, and courage and compassion: giving time, resources, little bits of life, energy, hope, skills, love, sometimes pouring out life serving – feeding the homeless; or feeding an aging parent; tutoring a youngster; or attending to the urgent needs of her own twelve-year-old son or grandson who is an innocent victim of a world characterized by gangs, drugs, guns; building a house with Habitat or simply refusing to abandon a home in which there lives a difficult spouse. I know, and so do you, great servants who quietly tend to people around them – their husbands, wives, their parents, children, their partner dying of AIDS. I know many humble and anonymous servants who do God's work, who follow Jesus to greatness without any self-consciousness, self-configuration or even recognition.

I was recently seated at a dinner table with people to whom I had just been introduced and the talk turned, as it always does, to families. Their three fine sons were there and we were admiring them; and she said,

> "We have a daughter too," and she quickly got out her wallet and showed us a picture of a lovely young women. "She is severely handicapped .... She can't communicate; but we love her and we're proud of her too."

And I thought about that mother and her daughter, close to her heart everyday for twenty-five years, and about Jesus' words that greatness is serving ...

At the end of her letter, Emilie thanked Nancy – who made the simple suggestion that going to Rwanda was a call. Of course it was – the call of Jesus Christ to men and women, to each of us, to realize our full humanity, our highest potential, our greatness as children of God, by serving.

Gerald May is a physician who has written beautifully about these matters. In a recent book he is discussing the physical state of stability, the goal of the physician – to stabilize us. It's called homeostasis. May writes:

> "Love does not permit homeostasis to be the end of things. If we so choose, whatever stability we have can be the source of endless beginnings. Our equilibrium can be gestation rather than stagnation. Homeostasis can be the place where we wake up to our yearnings, however painful, and claim them as our own. We can choose to follow our desires ... We can say yes to the invitation of love and begin to open up and reach out again. Each time we say yes we upset our stability. We sacrifice our serenity. We risk our safety. We become vulnerable to being hurt. And creation shines more brightly." [From *The Awakened Heart* by Gerald May, M.D., Harper, San Francisco, 1991, p. 37]

Jesus said,

> "Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant."

Amen.